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1997/07/08

Statement
by
Senator Fred Thompson
Governmental Affairs Committee
Tuesday, July 8, 1997

On March 11, 1997, the United States Senate voted 99-0 to authorize an investigation of illegal or improper activities in connection with the 1996 federal election campaigns.

Article One of our Constitution grants Congress its legislative powers. Implied within those powers is the right of Congress to conduct investigations with regard to matters that are of concern to this nation. Therefore, from time to time throughout our history when problems arise that raise grave questions about our government, Congress has carried out such investigations through Congressional hearings such as the ones we begin today.

These hearings serve two purposes. One purpose is to make determinations as to whether or not our laws should be changed or whether additional legislation is needed. The second purpose of hearings is to inform the American people as to how their government is operating -- to pull back the curtain and give the American people an unfiltered review as to how their system is working.

Within this broad outline, I believe it is important for us to remember what these hearings are and what they are not. First of all, they are not trials where people are prosecuted. They are not soap operas, designed to titillate. They are not athletic events where we keep a running score. Rather, these

hearings are serious looks at how our system is working with a view toward making our system better.

A lot of facts are already out on the public record. In fact, there has been an outpouring of information and allegations in the media for the last several months. There has been so much troubling information that it is easy for the average citizen to get lost in the maze of competing stories. Therefore, we are tempted to look for one key witness or one document which will explain it all. However, the truth seldom emerges that way. Our obligation in these hearings is to take this virtual blizzard of information, add new facts, provide some depth and context, and pull the material together and present it in a comprehensible form. And at the end of the day, I'm convinced that the true picture will emerge.

The allegations before us are serious. They include illegal foreign contributions and other illegal foreign involvement in our political process, money laundering, influence peddling, violations of the Hatch Act -- which prevents fundraising on government time or government property, violations of the Ethics in Government Act, violations of the conflict of interest laws, the improper use of the White House in fundraising activities and questions of whether our government's domestic and foreign policy was affected by political contributions.

These matters go to the basic integrity of our government and our electoral process and will constitute the first phase of our hearings.

There apparently was a systematic influx of illegal money in our presidential race last year. We will be wanting to know: Who knew about it? Who should have known about it? And was there an attempt to cover it up?

It has been pointed out that certain witnesses have fled the country or taken the Fifth Amendment. It has also been noted that we have a cutoff date of December 31. However, it should be remembered that we have much evidence available to us." And if anyone should unlawfully impede or misinform this Committee, there are criminal sanctions available.

Valuable information can be obtained in various ways. It seems that due to the fact these hearings are about to start, the White House has decided to release certain information before this Committee discloses it. Since information is being disclosed that the American people have long since been entitled to, we welcome being pre-empted. We expect that those under investigation will have cause to pre-empt us many times in the future.

When the first phase of our hearings is complete, we will begin the second phase, in which we will address the broader issues concerning our electoral process, including the role of soft money and the role of independent groups.

While most of the activities examined in the second phase are presumably legal, I believe that common practices in these areas by both parties are a far cry from the intent of Congress when it drafted our campaign finance laws after Watergate. I

personally believe we can do much better than the campaign finance system we have today. However, we cannot move forward unless we have accountability for the past. We cannot let calls for campaign finance reform be used as a shield to prevent examination of the violations of existing law. Otherwise, calls for reform will be viewed as merely partisan and the cause of reform will be harmed, not enhanced.

These hearings come at a time of economic prosperity, but at a time of increasing public cynicism about government. We now have less than half our people voting. I believe that part of this is due to what has happened to our political process, as evidenced by the matters before us. The American people see their leaders go to greater and more extreme lengths to raise unprecedented amounts of money for their political campaigns. Power is at stake and the ends justify the means. I believe that the thirst for increasing amounts of political money and what people are willing to do to get it lies at the heart of this investigation.

While these hearings are clearly necessary, we must realize that this process does not come without a price. Some say that the revealing of unpleasant information about our government just adds to the cynicism of the people. However, we decided over 200 years ago that as a free people we could be trusted with the truth; that we could conduct this kind of self-examination and come out stronger for it.

Also, it is often pointed out that Congressional investigations provide an opportunity for rank partisanship which further debases our system. It seems that it is true that the American people often expect the worst from us in Congress and we seldom disappoint them. But it doesn't have to be that way. We as Democrats and Republicans have much more in common than in things that divide us. Our first allegiance is to the nation. We all believe in the rule of law. Anything that undermines those things we hold most dear as a people are of grave concern to all of us.

So this Committee is presented with a unique opportunity.

We can conduct a good, thorough investigation, assess responsibility where appropriate and then make recommendations as how we can improve our system for the future. We can conduct these hearings without a lot of partisan bickering. People often say, "let the chips fall where they may." We can really mean it.

This Committee early on demonstrated its commitment to fairness by unanimously voting for a broad scope for this investigation that would allow us to look at all relevant matters, Democratic or Republican. If the American people see us honestly trying to get the facts, doing it in a professional manner, treating witnesses and each other with fairness and respect, we will enhance the status of this institution. More importantly it will enhance our government in the eyes of the American people.

That's our opportunity. That's our obligation.